

# Survivor-informed support for trafficked children in Scotland

## Research Summary

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STIRLING**



This is a summary of the report: **Improving survivor-informed support for separated children and young people in Scotland who have been trafficked**, a research project funded by the Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (Modern Slavery PEC), which in turn is funded and supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

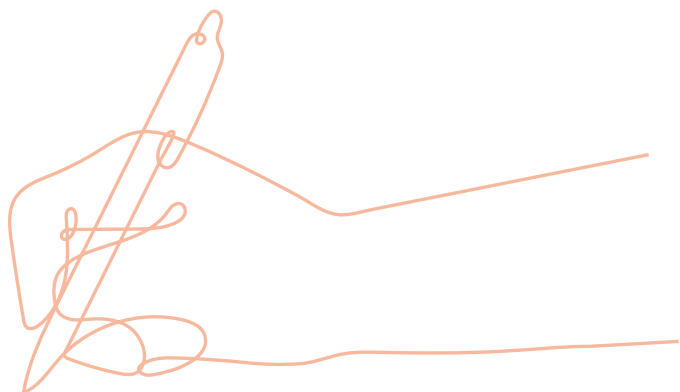
The research was conducted by Dr Maggie Grant, Dr Maria Fotopoulou, Scot Hunter, Professor Margaret Malloch, Dr Paul Rigby and Dr Kieran Taylor, all of University of Stirling.

The research team would like to thank, first and foremost, all the young people who participated in interviews, or considered participating in interviews, to support this research. We are also grateful to all the professionals who made time for interviews despite the pressures of busy workloads. We would also like to thank the Scottish Guardianship Service (SGS) – and in particular Nadia Stuart and Deb Watson – for inviting and supporting young people to participate and facilitating access to the SGS records, and all members of the project advisory group (with support from JustRight Scotland and Terre des Hommes), as well our legal consultant Clare Tudor for their support and input throughout the project.

The full report can be accessed on the Modern Slavery PEC website at [modernslaverypec.org/resources/trafficked-children-scotland](https://modernslaverypec.org/resources/trafficked-children-scotland)

The Modern Slavery PEC has supported this independent research project and worked closely with the research team to produce this Research Summary. However, the views expressed in this summary and the full report are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Modern Slavery PEC.

This project was funded through a Modern Slavery PEC open call for proposals to examine support and recovery of people who have experienced trafficking in the UK and is one of five projects commissioned through this portfolio.



## Key findings

- Young people in Scotland who have experienced trafficking and professionals used various definitions of recovery. They described it as a long, even life-long, process; where one is able and feels confident to make and voice choices; has regained a sense of control; has the ability to think about the future and make plans, as well as acknowledging exploitative experiences. Young people's accounts highlighted safety, identity, community and autonomy as inter-linked factors that promote recovery.
- 'System trauma', in particular navigating the asylum system, is one of the biggest barriers for young people's ability to recover following experiences of trafficking. The impact of the asylum process, including being interviewed and waiting for a decision, interferes with nearly all other areas of their lives. Young people and professionals described how feeling safe goes beyond physical safety to include stability provided by familiar routines and regular contact with people they trust, as well as a sense of predictability about the future, free from the insecurity caused by precarious immigration status.
- Trusting relationships which promote agency and choice are vital. It takes time for young people to build trust in relationships, particularly following experiences of exploitation. Over the long term, these relationships helped children and young people to develop their confidence and knowledge, leading to increased autonomy.
- Although effective multi-agency working has long been recognised as facilitating better support for young people, this remains an area of concern for professionals. They emphasised the continued need for clear coordination between agencies, specialist training on working with young people who have experienced trafficking and consistency of services across the country.
- Young people indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided by and through the Scottish Guardianship Service, highlighting activities that provided a structure and that brought them into contact with other people as particularly important.



## Background

Improving outcomes for separated children and young people who have experienced human trafficking is a major and urgent challenge facing the UK. While the exploitation experiences and immediate support needs of separated children who have experienced trafficking are well documented in research, the evidence base on what happens in the longer term for children and young people – and how they feel about it – is more limited.

Most evaluations of support provision focus on stories of trafficking and needs immediately or shortly after identification. Once children and young people move beyond this stage, the spotlight on them fades. This study sought to extend the timeframe to explore short, medium and long-term experiences of support and recovery. The study directly involved children and young people who had made their homes in the UK, eliciting narratives of recovery with a focus on their choices as well as needs, alongside data recorded by, or gathered from, professionals. The aim was to improve understanding of what constitutes sustainable support over a longer timeframe, thus offering valuable insights for all those working with this group of children and young people, in the UK and internationally.

The number of potential human trafficking victims in the UK is usually recorded by referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). This system was established in 2009 to identify and support victims to meet the UK's obligations under the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (ECAT). In 2022 a total of 16,938 individuals were referred, the highest numbers since the NRM commenced, of which 7,019 referrals were children under the age of 18 years at the time of exploitation, including 3,337 UK nationals ([Home Office 2023](#)). In Scotland, most referrals to the NRM are for non-UK nationals.

## Methodology

To achieve the study's aims, we explored how young people, practitioners and other stakeholders defined 'recovery' and their perspectives on the support that young people need and receive at different stages. We interviewed nineteen young people aged between 17 and 24 years, most of whom had been in the UK for between three and five years, although some had been here for longer. In addition, we interviewed 11 practitioners (Guardians, solicitors and social workers) working in a range of services to support separated and trafficked children. We also analysed 11 years of data from the Scottish Guardianship Service,<sup>1</sup> which helped to illuminate the trajectory of needs and support received for all 166 children referred to SGS who had been recognised as victims of trafficking up to October 2022.

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1. Since 1 April 2023 Scottish Guardianship Service is known as Guardianship Scotland and is a statutory service. The service is delivered by Scottish Refugee Council and Aberlour Children's Charity on behalf of Scottish Government

## Findings

1. Young people in Scotland who have experienced trafficking and professionals used various definitions of recovery: it was discussed as a long, even life-long, process; where one is able and feels confident to make and voice choices; has regained a sense of control; has the ability to think about the future and make plans as well as acknowledging exploitative experiences. Young people's accounts highlighted safety, identity, community and autonomy as inter-linked factors that promote recovery.

Interviews with young people and professionals reflected the complexity of exploitation and its impact on children and young people's subsequent lives. While physical safety is an immediate and critical priority for young people and professionals alike, it is – as one young person stressed – the 'bare minimum':

*Being in a safe place is a human right for everyone, you know. Everyone should be able to be in a safe place, that's the bare minimum.*

Young person

A broader understanding of safety – one encompassing not only an absence of physical harm and freedom from exploitation but a sense of predictability and security about the present and future – came through clearly in interviews with young people and was recognised by professionals. In the early stages, enrolment in education or other regular activities was a key priority not only for learning but also for the benefits of meeting other people and establishing a regular and familiar routine.

Young people and professionals noted that recovery does not necessarily mean that trauma 'disappears', but rather becomes manageable and children and young people come to understand that they are not defined by the experience of having been trafficked:

*I think it means being able to... that their identity isn't completely tied up in this entire experience and they can live with it alongside without having all the sleepless nights or being able to manage this feeling. Because you're never going to forget it, it's never going to not be a thing, but it's going to hurt less.*

Solicitor

Engagement with peers enabled young people to feel more than 'victims' or 'survivors'; simply to be young people. Friendships helped young people feel less isolated in their journeys through formal, often traumatising, processes, underlining the value of community in processes of recovery. Young people who looked back over a longer timeframe since they had first accessed support services described a gradual process of building up their own knowledge of the systems and confidence in their language skills, and developing increased autonomy as time passed.

The timeframes young people discussed often spanned several years, emphasising the importance of ensuring care experienced children's rights to care and support post-18, including accommodation, were recognised fully in practice. This is available in Scotland up to age 26 under support for care experienced young people.

The ability to plan, to hope and to dream about the future was described a pivotal element of recovery, as well as feeling empowered and having the autonomy and confidence to make life choices – free from external processes such as the asylum system.

2. 'System trauma', in particular navigating the asylum system, is one of the biggest barriers for young people's ability to recover following experiences of trafficking. The impact of the asylum process, including being interviewed and waiting for a decision, interferes with nearly all other areas of life. Young people and professionals described how feeling safe goes beyond physical safety to include stability provided by familiar routines and regular contact with people they trust, as well as a sense of predictability about the future, free from the insecurity caused by precarious immigration status.

Young people's lives were shaped by critical turning points, in the form of events that had either a positive or negative impact, rather than a specific measure of time period of support received by the Scottish Guardianship Service. Critically, the most important turning point discussed was not created by past experiences of trauma linked to exploitation and resulting need, but 'system trauma' when navigating complex systems of asylum, care and support, and especially the asylum system (Rigby et al, 2020).

The policies and legislation that shape the lives of separated children and young people who have experienced child trafficking – in terms of accommodation, education, support, residence rights – are divided between the UK Government (for 'reserved matters', namely immigration and asylum) and the Scottish Governments (for 'devolved matters' including support and safeguarding). The decision-making authority on whether children are recognised as victims of trafficking is presently located within the Home Office, with the single competent authority, but child

protection, education, health and related support services are devolved to the Scottish Government and delivered under devolved legislation.

Most young people in contact with the SGS will be involved with the asylum or humanitarian protection systems. Young people described the often overwhelming feelings associated with waiting for their 'papers' (documents from the Home Office confirming the right to remain in the UK), and the impact on mental and physical health, education or work and friendships.

For many young people, their most difficult interactions with professionals had centred around being interviewed about their experiences of trafficking and/or the experiences that led them to move to the UK.

*About the Home Office, I just told them everything what they asked me, because I was told that they need to know, in terms of help with my case, and help me settle down here. ... I went through hell to give them all the information. ... And you can imagine how painful that was for me.*

Young person

Similarly, practitioners reflected that in their experience 'system trauma' can be one of the biggest barriers for young people in their ability to recover from experiences of trafficking:

*If you think about it, education and being safe, and all that, takes a back seat. Because if you don't know whether you're staying or not, you live in limbo, you can't plan forward, you can't make any plans, you start losing the motivation of why they...I might be deported, why do I even want to learn English, why should I continue with college. And it becomes a downward spiral. So, the asylum process is the major, major thing. All these others are just by the ways, you know what I mean, they are equally important, but without immigration status, then you can't plan your life.*

Social worker

Young people interviewed talked about the impact of stress on eating, sleeping and concentration, with the main stressors being concerns about their safety (particularly in the early stages post identification), key stages of the asylum process (when they were interviewed, often at length, about their experiences), the longer-term experience of waiting for the outcome, coping with memories of previous events, and missing and/or worrying about family members.

3. Trusting relationships which promote agency and choice are vital. It takes time for young people to build trust in relationships, particularly following experiences of exploitation. Over the long term, these relationships helped children and young people to develop their confidence and knowledge, leading to increased autonomy.

Young people and professionals were united in the view that good practice in providing support was contingent upon the formation of trusting relationships. Trust and relationships were overwhelmingly highlighted as a vital ingredient – even condition – to providing effective support, as illustrated below:

*I think first of all that has to come through building trust and relationships. And some of it is it's not just young people that have been trafficked; it's what you would do for any young person: you would want them to feel cared for, that they matter, that they are a priority.*

Guardian

Young people spoke frequently about the importance of feeling that someone cared enough to listen to them. One young person reflected on his experience with the keyworker in his accommodation and his Guardian:

*They normally talk to me, they asked how I was, how my life was, whether my mood was okay, my mental health was okay, if I needed any help at all. They taught me how to deal with things, how to do things better.*

Young person

Young people underlined the importance of being listened to and given choice in key decisions about their lives. Practitioners also recognised providing choice and empowerment as vital to good practice, and particularly relevant for this specific group given the disempowering experience of having been trafficked.

The establishment of trusting relationships was further discussed as dependent on adopting child-friendly, compassionate and responsive ways of working. Consistency and reliability were all discussed as vital elements of good practice, as documented in previous studies. Choosing which information, and when, to share with professionals was an important component of building trusting relationships; widely recognised as core to effective practice with children and young people who have been trafficked (Hynes et al 2022). As illustrated earlier, young people clearly articulated the costs of having to discuss traumatic experiences, often repeatedly and at length, with professionals.



4. Professionals highlighted the continued need for effective multi-agency working, recognising that effective collaboration facilitates better support for young people. They emphasised the importance of clear coordination between agencies, specialist training on working with young people who have experienced trafficking and improved consistency of services across the country.

Some of the elements of good practice highlighted by study participants were evident across a range of services and included: regular supervisor training to ensure the appropriateness of responses, early identification of trafficking indicators and timely needs assessment; training to ensure strengths-based practice approaches were adopted; multi-agency co-ordinated working with clear expectations from all participating agencies as well as integration of responses within the child protection system. However, structural factors could negatively impact on the formation of trusting relationships and options for institutional support.

Practitioners' responses were by no means surprising; they have been documented widely in studies exploring service provision to children and young people who had been trafficked, but it was concerning that some issues that have long been recognised still affected current practice. As one practitioner noted, partnership working is easy to say but not always easy to implement.

A further element discussed as impacting practice, and especially multi-agency working processes, was the competing priorities of different services involved in the support of children and young people who had experienced trafficking. Perhaps not surprisingly, competing priorities between the immigration and criminal justice systems on the one hand, and child protection processes on the other, were highlighted as a particular challenge for effective multi-agency working by the vast majority of interviewees. However, as clearly illustrated below, a focus on punishable acts the young people committed during the period and as a result of exploitation, rather than them being exploited, also hinders effective support for this group.

*One huge obstacle I would say is the more recent re-trend of criminalising young people again. So yeah, the criminal justice system, that's been a huge obstacle. We've seen a huge increase in young people referrals from Polmont [young offenders institution] [...] And we know that in international and domestic policy, they should be treated as children first. And in a lot of ways, yes, that does happen, but policy isn't always put into practice.*

Guardian

5. Young people indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided by and through the Scottish Guardianship Service, highlighting activities that provided a structure and which brought them into contact with other people as particularly important.

Scottish Guardianship Service is a specialist service set up in 2009 to support unaccompanied children in Scotland, including children who have experienced trafficking. Since 1 April 2023 (after data collection for the current study) it is named Guardianship Scotland and became a statutory service. Guardians help children and young people settle into life in Scotland and cope with being apart from their families in a new country. They support young people in navigating the complex immigration, legal and welfare systems described earlier. They help young people to understand the roles and responsibility of different professionals and act as a link between different services and professionals involved in young people's lives.

A key component of the study was using service data from SGS alongside interview data from young people and professionals, which helped to illuminate the trajectory of needs and support received for all children referred to SGS who had been recognised as victims of trafficking throughout that period.

Young people highlighted the importance of services helping young people access activities that provided a structure to daily life. Several young people, when asked about the most important forms of support, identified activities that brought them into contact with other people.

The sampling method for the case file data meant that all the children and young people in the study had received support from the SGS, including advocacy, peer group, mental health and befriending services and drop in sessions. The responses from the interview participants indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the support provided (although it is important to note that the research design made it more likely to identify and interview young people with positive experiences of the services).

One young person, who had received leave to remain a few years ago, described her first experiences with the Guardians as a 'glimmer of hope'. These days she has a busy job, active social life and several hobbies she enjoys, and has less contact with support services. But she recalled clearly how difficult it was in the early days to open up to people, particularly after some early interactions with professionals who had little experience of working with separated children or knowledge about the needs of Black children. She explained:

*Like everything else, it did take time. ... But I felt a lot of warmth coming from the Guardianship project, as soon as I met them.*

Young person

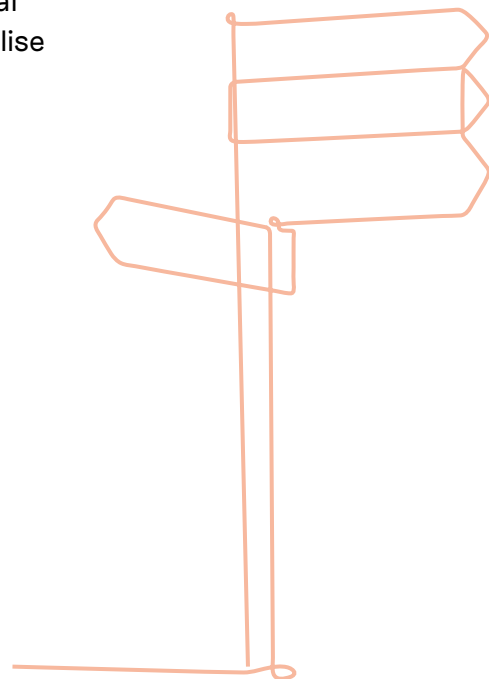
## Recommendations

- **The UK and Scottish Governments must ensure that a child protection framework of support and processes take priority over NRM referrals.** OSCE (2022)<sup>2</sup> indicate that any NRM should build on existing national child protection systems, where a child's best interest is at the centre of decision making in line with state obligations under the UNCRC.
- **The Home Office must ensure that decision making processes are timely.** Immigration status is crucial in allowing young people to make plans and organise their lives. Ensuring decision making is timely is imperative to recovery.
- **The Scottish Government and other funding bodies need to ensure that services are properly resourced to provide adequate and appropriate levels of support.** Limited provisions work against building trusting relationships and can often impact on the effectiveness of engagement and subsequently longer-term outcomes for young people. Continuity and consistency are vital in establishing trusting relationships as a pre-condition for recovery. The Scottish model of guardianship support for all separated children, regardless of NRM decisions, combined with provision of support post-18 for care experienced young people, provides this. Identification and support in Scotland is not conditional on a positive NRM decision and reflects the importance of the child protection and support framework and process as indicated in the first recommendation.
- **Clear collaborative objectives that over-ride the organisational priorities of any one agency need to be reinforced.** Strengths-based practice approaches should be adopted, alongside multi-agency co-ordinated working and integrated responses within the child protection system.
- **Young people require support – including education, financial, accommodation and mental health support – that goes beyond specific services related to trafficking in order to meet their longer-term needs and support longer-term recovery.** These are presently available in Scotland under child-care and throughcare and aftercare provisions and professionals need to ensure equal access to services across the country, supported by additional training where necessary. Service outcomes should reflect the priorities of children and young people and their understandings of 'recovery'.
- **All statutory and non-statutory bodies working with separated and trafficked children need to ensure that the focus remains on children's needs rather than particular national groups.** Professionals have ongoing concerns about the patterns of over-representation of specific nationalities in processes of identification. Ongoing training regarding patterns of arrivals, the importance of assessment within a child protection framework utilising possible trafficking indicators, and the need for a multi-agency response (including cross border) are all important factors regarding the focus on needs.

2. OHDR (2022) National Referral Mechanisms: Joint Efforts to Protect the Rights of Trafficked Persons <https://www.osce.org/odihr/NRM-handbook>

## Areas for further research

- Further research is needed to explore how young people are identified as victims of trafficking and/or exploitation and how this may influence or determine responses at the initial point of contact with services, based on needs rather than nationality or mode of entry. Most importantly, young people's involvement in research should ensure that instead of being viewed as passive recipients, research offers them the opportunity to actively shape the knowledge produced about them as well as the services put in place to support them. This can be achieved through research designs that aim to democratise research processes, by promoting a sharing of power in decision making; by being inclusive of all perspectives, experiences and skills; by placing value on knowledge emerging from lived experience, and by being based on reciprocal relationships.
- There is a need to ensure records of service provision are clear and recording processes are accurate for all children and young people who have experienced exploitation through trafficking. There needs to be accurate statistical data collected to inform the planning and development of policy and practice. SGS could be well placed to continue the development of this work.
- Related to this, and the retrospective nature of this study, research adopting a longitudinal methodology over a significant period of time, and involving all key agencies, would provide a more detailed picture of the services needed by and provided for children and young people who have been trafficked.
- The on-going criminalisation of young people requires further exploration as it can have significant impact on processes of recovery for children and young people who have experienced trafficking. This is likely to be even more important now under the potential provisions of the Illegal Migration Bill to criminalise the mode of arrival.



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